

Leading Change and Building Excellence

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These are exciting times for higher education and for the University of Minnesota. We are presented with unprecedented challenges and, I would like to emphasize, unprecedented “opportunities.” The time is now to renew and to transform this great university. And I use the word transform advisedly. We are urging the entire university to consider the future of our University with boldness, creativity, and determination. With every task we undertake, we must build “excellence” through a coherent and strategic vision.

Within the next decade, the University of Minnesota aspires to be one of the top three public universities in the world. I’m often asked who the other two universities will be and I answer: certainly the University of Minnesota will be one of the three, while the other two may change from time to time.

Your role as Chairs, Heads, and Directors is more critical—and inspiring—than ever. We will require—to reach our goal—exceptional leadership from each of you here today. There are many characteristics of true leaders, but I would like to highlight a few especially related to our new strategic planning efforts.¹

Leaders must, and I would like to underscore this point, have integrity and be seen by others to be honest and trustworthy, and one who creates a “climate” of trust. A leader must be persistent, not impatient. We expect a leader to have drive, energy, and enthusiasm, as well as being a longer-term strategic thinker who also is setting and reaching new goals. The “usual” and the ordinary should not define the leader's agenda or

¹ For information regarding the University's strategic positioning process, including the January 2005 draft report *The University of Minnesota: Advancing The Public Good-- Securing the University's Leadership Position In the 21st Century* see: http://www1.umn.edu/systemwide/strategic_positioning/

calendar—and by this I mean that we each must be careful not to encourage habits of complacency or timidity.

There are, of course, major differences between leading and managing. In contrast to the characteristics of leadership I have just described, “management” requires organizing, planning, motivating, economizing, and careful attention to detail. A manager must function at the micro level, while the leader generally should reserve the majority of his or her time to the macro level of planning. An accomplished leader and manager understands the difference between leading and managing.

This can be ensured by selecting well an administrative team and by delegating some decision-making to one's administrative colleagues. Selective delegation can ensure an effective balance between leading and managing.²

In addition, and I believe this is important here at the University—which aims to be a place of discovery and creative endeavor—a leader must also know how to advocate and champion for the work of others and understand the need to act to “remove” barriers and distractions to the very best work of faculty, staff, and students.

I would ask each of you to consider your new roles—and how *each* of you can best provide leadership to the University—in the context of our new strategic positioning efforts.

To reach our goal to be one of the top three public research universities will require strategic thinking and planning. We need, and our strategic positioning document outlines, a coherent vision of the future of this University, one that will continue to build excellence through enhanced quality in our teaching and research.

It is now clear that incremental changes or marginal cuts are no longer viable or sufficient to sustain our future. We have entered a “transformative era” for higher education in the country and in Minnesota. There is a certain urgency for fundamental change.

² The comments above on leadership and on the distinction between leading and managing are drawn from my “Decanal Leadership: Managing Relations” 31 U. Tol. L. Rev. 749 (2000).

We will begin by ensuring that each decision aligns resources, whether from public or private sources, with the academic and intellectual priorities of the University. Two task forces—one looking at academic issues and the other reviewing administrative issues—are currently preparing recommendations to be provided to President Bruininks by mid-March.

This necessary alignment of resources (academic and administrative) is a precondition to building a coherent focus on excellence. To ensure that we stay focused, we need to engage in careful strategic thinking and planning so that we are able to maintain a coherent institutional vision and implement it in an efficient, fair, and effective way. By this, I mean that the process is not a static one—rather, strategic planning is necessarily a work in progress, a work that each of you can help to define and refine as we move forward.

Strategic thinking and planning imply that priorities will be set. In setting academic priorities, a focus on *quality* is the most important measure, along with 1) examining how each program relates to and is central to the mission of the University and 2) whether we have a comparative or unique advantage by supporting or enhancing particular programs.

If we are to be successful in building excellence at each task within our mission, we need to evaluate carefully the balance between capacity and demand. This will help us identify where there are efficiencies, economies of scale, and ultimately “effectiveness.” In the end, this process should inform our decisions and validate our actions.³ Our strategic planning document carefully outlines the seven decision making criteria we will use, as we move ahead.

³ See my: “Building Excellence Through a Coherent Vision” available at: <http://academic.umn.edu/provost/reports/aug032004.html>

At the Board of Regents meeting on February 10th, President Bruininks and I submitted the strategic positioning document to the Board of Regents.⁴ Their response was very supportive, indeed enthusiastic. As Regent Maureen Reed commented at that meeting: “This is the right goal. A great institution is never satisfied with the status quo.”

Our report identifies five action strategies in pursuit of our goal of reshaping and transforming the University. I’d like to briefly review these with you as I believe all of you have a critical role to play in the success of each—and I’d like to emphasize each—of our five action strategies.

Our first strategy is to recruit, educate, challenge, and graduate outstanding students. Each of you, each of us, must do all we can to attract the best students—of all backgrounds—here to the University. Thomas Jefferson eloquently expressed the obligation of public universities to “avail the State of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use if not sought for and cultivated.”⁵

It is extremely important for the University to do all it can to bring bright, diverse, well-prepared, and “motivated” students here. We cannot be a great university without recognizing that promoting access based on talent and potential – and not income or other social advantages – is a crucial aspect of our mission.

If we are to prepare students for roles in a multiracial, multicultural environment, then we need to provide that environment at this University. That is, we must ensure that we fully understand as a public university that diversity and excellence are intertwined. And we must—must—do more to retain and mentor and advise our students.

Our second strategy is to recruit, mentor, reward, and retain outstanding faculty and staff. Without a great faculty and without exceptional staff we cannot reach our goal. We are

⁴ See footnote 1.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782).

especially challenged in that about half of the faculty of the University of Minnesota is of an age likely to retire within the next decade. This represents one of the University's greatest challenges and one of its greatest opportunities.

The opportunities are clear. In the coming decade, the University has the opportunity to identify, attract, mentor, inspire, reward, and retain faculty of the highest quality. This responsibility is largely yours—those on the front lines of hiring and promoting faculty. Our standards must be up to the challenge to take us to the top three public research universities in the world.

Last November I made some remarks, at a national Diversity Conference⁶ held here at the University, that we should look more closely at mentoring opportunities for faculty—faculty mentoring is, I believe, underutilized in some parts of the University.

In addition, to be attractive to the highest quality, diverse faculty and staff will require that we offer salaries, benefits, and programmatic support and support for graduate students comparable to other top universities. Such selective investments are “central” to retaining the University's current strengths and to building additional strengths.

There are four key elements of our second action strategy:

- 1) identify and attract scholars and teachers of the highest quality and potential;
- 2) encourage and promote greater diversity of faculty background and of ideas;
- 3) inspire, challenge, mentor, retain, and reward faculty; and
- 4) establish and enforce at each opportunity University-wide standards for faculty excellence in tenure and promotion decisions.

Regarding the first two priorities of our action strategies, we simply must do better in investing in our Human Capital—the University's faculty, staff, and students.

⁶ My remarks on “The Importance of a Diverse Faculty” are available at:
<http://academic.umn.edu/provost/reports/diversity2004.html>

And our final three action strategies will require your utmost attention—and imagination. We must promote an effective organizational “culture” that is committed to excellence and responsive to managing change. In addition, we must enhance and effectively utilize our resources and infrastructure. And, we must—and here is an area where I believe we can especially improve—we must communicate clearly and credibly with all our constituencies and practice public engagement “responsive” to the public good.

Recent poll data indicates that some Minnesota residents fail to appreciate what we do—and equally important—how *well* we do it. Each of us should try to think of ways, large and small, to better communicate what we do and how we do it. By our words and actions, we must inspire all of us to raise our expectations and goals.

Clearly, we have many challenges as we reposition and—in some ways—reinvent the University of Minnesota. Such changes will require leadership at all levels of the University and changes to our current culture. But with these challenges there are also "opportunities." And opportunities can and should be inspiring.

As Department Chairs, Heads, and Directors, I challenge each of you to join us in moving a very good University into the ranks of “greatness.” That should be the charge and legacy for all of us. But we simply cannot move to the next level of “excellence” without your bold and inspirational leadership.

I look forward, and I trust you look forward, to those challenges and those opportunities, as we help to lead the University of Minnesota to new heights of “excellence.”

Thank you for your “partnership” in this new, exciting, and most important challenge.